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# YOU AND YOUR MEDICINES: GUIDELINES FOR OLDER AMERICANS

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## AN INFORMATION PAPER

PREPARED FOR USE BY THE

## SPECIAL COMMITTEE ON AGING
## UNITED STATES SENATE

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This document has been printed for information purposes. It does not offer findings or recommendations by this committee

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## PREFACE

Of the problems facing older Americans today, misuse and unintentional abuse of prescription and nonprescription drugs ranks among the most prevalent—with often tragic results. Advances in modern drug therapy have saved countless lives. Drugs may contribute to increased longevity and—to at least some degree—to an improvement in the quality of life for millions of older Americans. Even such traditionally debilitating diseases as high blood pressure often can be controlled with drugs. Yet tragically, too many older persons suffer needlessly from improper use and abuse of these same drugs.

The high level of drug-induced illness in the population over age 65 can be attributed to several factors:

(1) Age-related changes in the body decrease an individual's tolerance of drugs and increase the likelihood of adverse reactions.

(2) Older people usually have a variety of medical conditions that are treated with drugs. Consequently, they are more likely to take several drugs, often simultaneously, and are thus more likely to experience adverse side effects and dangerous drug interactions. Also, some drugs taken for one condition may make other conditions worse.

(3) Medication often is taken improperly. Many older individuals take more than one drug and often misunderstand or forget their schedule. Intentional noncompliance also contributes to improper use of medication.

(4) Poor communication between the patient and the health professionals—doctors and pharmacists—is another major factor. The concept of a "health team," with patient and health professional working together, is not well-established in practice.

Given the scope of the problem of drug misuse, and the absence of useful self-help material, the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging has developed this booklet of guidelines for the older consumer. Each of the four factors mentioned above will be discussed in some detail, followed by advice on the proper use of prescription and nonprescription drugs.

Information in this booklet cannot replace the advice of your doctor and pharmacist and is not intended to do so. It is designed to help you learn about the medicines you take, and to minimize problems associated with drugs.

This print was developed by the committee with the assistance of pharmacist Charlene Celano. The text was reviewed and revised by a panel of nationally known pharmacists and doctors.

We hope this information will be helpful to older Americans, their families, and the health care professionals who work with them.

JOHN HEINZ,
*Chairman.*
JOHN GLENN,
*Ranking Minority Member.*

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# YOU AND YOUR MEDICINES: GUIDELINES FOR OLDER AMERICANS

## INTRODUCTION

Now that you are older, drugs will affect you somewhat differently than they did before. Your heart, liver, and kidneys play a vital role in processing drugs through your system. With age, these organs become somewhat less efficient. As a result, drugs may act less effectively and more unpredictably, with the possibility of adverse effects. Given the potential for unpredictable effects, it is particularly important to let your doctor know how you are reacting to the medication.

Aging may mean you are troubled by at least one and possibly several chronic illnesses or complaints. Whether you suffer from serious, debilitating illnesses, such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, kidney disease, and asthma, or from less serious, but annoying aches and pains, you probably take one or more drugs on a regular basis. Some of these drugs are vital to your health and literally may mean the difference between life and death; some may make you more comfortable, allow you to move more freely with less pain, or help you to function better day-to-day.

Modern drugs can contribute greatly to your health and well-being, but the drugs themselves can make you sick. As discussed above, age-related changes in your body may mean drugs work less effectively and increase the risk of an adverse drug reaction. The greater the number of drugs you take, the greater the risk you face.

## WHY MEDICATION IS IMPROPERLY TAKEN

Several factors contribute to the improper use of drugs among older persons.

### Misunderstanding

Your doctor's instructions on use of a drug should include when to take the medication and in what dosage. If you don't understand your physician's instructions, ask him to repeat them clearly and to write them out so you can read them. Also ask your doctor to write out full instructions on the prescription blank—the pharmacist then will include them on the bottle label. Never leave your physician's office or the pharmacy without a clear understanding of exactly when and how to take your medication!

### Forgetting the Correct Dosage

Forgetfulness can be a real problem for older people who take several drugs and at different times throughout the day.

Commercial aids for medication schedules are available from certain professional associations or senior citizens groups. Or, you can design your own record sheet based on the sample shown on page 2.

# Weekly Medication Calendar

Dates:_____(Fill in times for drugs to be taken.)

| | Time: | Time: | Time: | Time: |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Sun | | | | |
| Mon | | | | |
| Tue | | | | |
| Wed | | | | |
| Thur | | | | |
| Fri | | | | |
| Sat | | | | |

Take some blank calendar sheets with you to your next appointment with your doctor or nurse. Ask your doctor or nurse to fill in the proper dates, medications, and times in the appropriate places. (If you prefer, you can fill in the blanks yourself, or ask your pharmacist to help fill out the calendar.)

Post the calendar in a place where you will see it frequently, near where you keep your medicines. Each day, at the correct time, take all the medications listed in the boxes for that time and day.

After taking each medicine as directed, cross out the box on the calendar listing the medicine you have taken.

If you are ever unsure about what pills to take or at what times, be sure to call your doctor, nurse, or pharmacist.

To eliminate confusion, you can have sample pills taped onto the calendar to indicate which medicine is which. If you have a medication card, make sure that the drugs listed on the calendar match the ones on the medication card.

Another alternative is to organize your doses ahead of time, setting out enough of each medication to last you for a day or week. Commercial organizers are available with several compartments. Place the exact number of tablets or capsules of each drug needed for each day into each compartment, then take each dose at the proper time.

Many drug tablets look alike. It is extremely important to keep all drugs in the proper vials, with the original labeling and directions. If you use the daily planner method for organizing your medication, remove only the amount you need for each compartment. Nitroglycerin should *not* be removed from the original vial.

## Intentional Misuse

A recent study asked older persons why they did not take their medications properly. The most frequent responses were:

1. I don't like the medication or the prescription dosage (46 percent).
2. I take them when I feel I need them (23 percent).
3. The drug is too expensive (9.4 percent).
4. I get better results taking them my own way (6.8 percent).
5. The doctor told me I could deviate from the prescription (5.4 percent).
6. I get bad side effects (4.1 percent).
7. I sometimes forget or am too busy (2.7 percent).

Following is a brief discussion of each of these points.

### 1. I don't like the medication or the prescription dosage

Many medications are difficult to swallow, taste bad, are unpleasant to use, or cause uncomfortable side effects. There are ways to solve these problems.

If you have difficulty in swallowing tablets or capsules, take several swallows of water first, then follow the tablet or capsule with a full glass of water. Certain drugs are available in both tablet and capsule form. Capsules may be easier to swallow; or they can be opened and the contents sprinkled on food (such as applesauce) if eaten immediately. Some, but not all, tablets can be cut in half or chewed. Ask your pharmacist for suggestions.

*Bad taste.*—Bad tasting medicine is a common problem with liquid preparations, especially potassium. Liquids can be diluted in fruit juice. Effervescent tablets can also be dissolved in juice. In some cases, the same drug is marketed by several manufacturers. One may taste better to you than another—again, ask your pharmacist's advice.

*Unpleasant to use.*—Many drugs are available in a variety of dosage forms. Certain dosage forms can be made easier to use. For example, suppositories may be more comfortable to insert if moistened slightly. Check with your pharmacist for suggestions.

*Uncomfortable effects.*—These may include drowsiness, dry mouth, frequent or difficult urination, blurred vision, changes in sleep habits, changes in bowel habits. Some of these effects may be unavoidable, others may be relieved by simple measures. Ask your doctor or pharmacist for advice.

### 2. I TAKE THEM WHEN I FEEL I NEED THEM

Drugs needed to regulate bodily functions don't always make a marked difference in how you feel. This is especially true of drugs to lower blood pressure and of heart medications. Only your doctor is qualified to decide how you should take your drugs; if you have questions, ask your doctor.

### 3. THE DRUG IS TOO EXPENSIVE

There are several ways to lower medication costs. Don't hesitate to discuss cost with your doctor and pharmacist. Together they should be able to find medicines that cost less and still are effective for you. Ask your pharmacist for recommendations on generic drugs. Usually, but not always, they act the same as the name brand drug you have been taking.

For drugs you use on a regular basis, you can often reduce costs by buying in larger quantities. If your doctor prescribes a new drug, ask your pharmacist if it is possible to get a small, trial supply.

Some pharmacies offer a senior citizen discount on prescription drugs. This discount can save you a substantial amount of money. Also, you may be eligible for medical and prescription aid through Federal, State, local, or private programs.

If you carry private health insurance, you may be reimbursed for prescription drugs. Most insurers require receipts which include the prescription number, name and strength of drug, date the prescription is filled, amount you paid, and the pharmacist's signature. Be sure your receipts are complete before leaving the pharmacy. When filing your claim, keep a copy of all receipts for your records.

### 4. I GET BETTER RESULTS TAKING THEM MY OWN WAY

If you take your drug other than as directed by your doctor, be sure to let him know. Otherwise he won't be able to judge your progress.

### 5. THE DOCTOR TOLD ME I COULD DEVIATE FROM THE PRESCRIPTION

This is the only valid reason for not taking medication as directed!

### 6. I GET BAD SIDE EFFECTS

Discuss this problem with your doctor or pharmacist. In some cases, side effects are temporary and will lessen as your body adjusts to the drug. Some side effects can be minimized by taking the drug at a different time, or by taking it with food. A dosage adjustment might be recommended by your doctor.

Occasionally, side effects will necessitate discontinuing use or switching to another drug, but this decision should only be made with your doctor.

### 7. I SOMETIMES FORGET OR I'M TOO BUSY

Several methods to help organize your medication schedule are discussed above. If you plan your medication schedule around your daily routine, it is easier to remember to take your drugs.

Following are a few additional do's and don'ts for proper use of medication.

—DO keep all medication in the original pharmacy vial, except to organize a daily planner. The pharmacy vial is designed to protect the drug from deterioration and has important identification information.

—DO keep the prescription number. You'll need it to get your prescription refilled.

—DO keep a list of your medication in your wallet. Show it to each doctor, dentist, and pharmacist who treats you.

—DO read each label each time you take your medication. Prescription vials look alike.

—DO make sure you can read the label. Many drugs look alike and the small pharmacy label can be difficult to read. Ask your pharmacist to type a big label.

—DO ask your pharmacist to explain any additional labels to you.

—DO make sure you are fully awake before taking nighttime doses. Keep a night light on so you can see.

—DO mark your prescription vials with color dots or symbols if you have poor vision. For example, red dot—heart pill; blue dot—water pill; yellow dot—sugar pill.

—DO ask your pharmacist to mark what each drug is for. For example, Digoxin—heart pill; Lasix—water pill.

—DO ask your pharmacist not to use child-proof caps. Keep your medication away from children.

—DO measure liquid medications exactly. Use measuring cups and spoons intended for cooking, or commercial drug measuring cups, spoons, or oral syringes from your pharmacist.

—DO dispose of unused medication properly by flushing down the toilet.

—DO ask your doctor or pharmacist exactly how and when you should take your medicine.

—DON'T keep unused medicine you no longer take.

—DON'T dispose of intact medication syringes and needles. Break the barrel and needle before disposing.

—DON'T keep sleeping medication right next to the bed—you may take too many.

—DON'T share drugs with others or take anyone else's medicine. Your friends' drugs are probably very dangerous for you.

## YOUR HEALTH TEAM

Think of your family doctor, your local pharmacist, other health professionals you may consult, and yourself as your health care team. Your team shares the responsibility for maintaining your health, including supervision of the prescription and nonprescription medication you take. Of all the team members, you are the most essential; you are the reason the team exists, and your role must be an active one.

### Your Role

You know your body better than anyone else, what is normal and what is unusual. Both your doctor and your pharmacist depend on you for information about your health.

It's not unusual to feel reluctant to "take up too much time" when you call or visit your physician. Too often the older patient goes away from the doctor's office with only a partial understanding of his medical problem, and little understanding of the drug therapy prescribed.

Remember: Your doctor has a responsibility to you as a patient, a responsibility which includes discussing your problems in as much detail as you need. When you see your doctor, don't hesitate to ask questions, and ask them more than once if necessary.

Prepare for each visit to your doctor, and even for telephone calls, by making a list of any symptoms or physical complaints you want to discuss. Make a list of specific questions you want to ask your doctor, as well as a list of all medications you currently take, including nonprescription drugs. Tell your doctor about any bad reactions to drugs you experienced. If you are seeing a doctor for the first time, have your other doctor send your medical records before your visit.

As a member of your health care team, it is your responsibility to know exactly what drugs you are taking and what they are for. You should make a list which includes the drug, its strength, how you take it, and who prescribed it for you. Also list any nonprescription drugs, including vitamins, antacids, laxatives, etc. This list is your personal medication record. Carry it with you always. Show it to your doctor, dentist, and pharmacist whenever you see them for medical reasons.

If you take a prescription drug, you should know exactly what it is and why you are taking it. Ask your doctor why he is prescribing it and what he hopes the drug will do. Ask what side effects you should watch for, and how you will know the drug is working for you. Ask if you really need medication.

Some conditions can be treated without drugs; taking care of yourself can reduce your need for other medications. For example, diabetic adults who watch their diets and maintain their weight can avoid the need for oral hypoglycemic (blood sugar lowering) medication. Diabetics who use insulin may not need as much.

Regular, moderate exercise can make you feel better and decrease your need for medication. Exercise strengthens muscles and increases stamina. Regular exercise can aid in weight control while increasing the appetite (an important factor for many elderly people who do not eat properly). It can also help you sleep better.

## Your Doctor's Role

We live in an age of specialization and nowhere is this more evident than in the area of medical care. You may see a variety of doctors, each for a specific complaint. While you benefit from the advice of these experts, you should designate one physician as your primary doctor. This doctor—usually your family doctor—is the most important physician on your health team. He should be told about all the other physicians and dentists you see. Keep your family doctor informed about all medications and treatments you receive and who prescribed them. Other physicians who treat you should be referred to your family doctor for comprehensive information on your medical care.

As mentioned before, never be afraid to ask questions of your doctor. You have a right to his time and attention and he has a responsibility to you to make sure you understand your condition and any treatment he prescribes.

If you feel your primary doctor is unwilling to talk with you and answer your questions, discuss the problem. If you cannot reach an agreement, perhaps you should seek the advice of another doctor.

Whenever your physician prescribes medication, ask the following questions:

(1) What does he feel the problem is—can it be treated without drugs?

(2) What type of medication are you prescribing for me?

(3) What effect will the drug have?

(4) What side effects should I watch for? What should I do if they occur? Are they temporary?

(5) How long will I take this drug? Should I have the prescription refilled?

(6) Should I continue taking drugs previously prescribed?

(7) When should I see you again?

(8) How should I take this drug? Should I take it exactly as the label says or should I only take it when I feel I need it?

(9) Can I take this drug with the other medication I am taking?

(10) Should I avoid alcohol or certain foods while I am taking this drug?

(11) Will you repeat (or write down) your instructions?

(12) Will you write out all directions on the prescription instead of just "as directed"?

## Your Pharmacist's Role

Your pharmacist is the other key member of your health team. As with your family doctor, you should have one pharmacist with whom you feel comfortable, who knows your medical history, who you use fairly exclusively for your prescription and nonprescription drug needs.

Your pharmacist is a drug specialist. He has studied drugs at a school of pharmacy and is licensed by the State to practice pharmacy. Your pharmacist can answer questions about the drugs you take and tell you how to take them correctly. He can advise you on possible side effects from certain drugs and recommend how to deal with these side effects. If you feel you need a nonprescription (over-the-counter)

drug, the pharmacist can suggest a product for you to take. He may suggest you not take an OTC drug, or switch from one you are taking.

Consult with your family pharmacist on treatment of very minor illnesses, such as headaches, colds, and skin rashes. His advice also is good for treating minor injuries, such as minor burns, insect bites, and cuts. If your pharmacist suggests you see your doctor, do so—it means that in his professional opinion your illness or injury is severe enough to require medical attention.

You can ask your pharmacist about your drugs, including the following:

(1) At what times should I take this drug?

(2) Should I take this drug with food or on an empty stomach?

(3) Should I avoid alcohol or certain foods while I am taking this drug?

(4) Will it cause drowsiness or dizziness? What other side effects should I be aware of?

(5) Can I take this drug with the other drugs (prescription and nonprescription) I am taking?

(6) Can this drug be purchased generically? Do you recommend generic substitution?

(7) Will you explain the label directions to me?

(8) Will you put a non-child-proof top on my prescription?

(9) How should I store this drug? How long should I keep it before disposing of it?

(10) What should I do if I miss a dose? What if I miss several doses?

(11) Will you put what the drug is for (example, Lasix—water pill) on the label?

(12) Do you have any additional written information about this drug?

## PRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Prescription drugs may be obtained only with a written or oral prescription order from a licensed physician, dentist, or podiatrist. Don't take a prescription drug without medical supervision, i.e., without the advice of your doctor.

Following are some basic guidelines for the proper use of prescription drugs.

### When To Take Each Dose

If your instructions are to take the medication once daily, you should take it at the same time each day. One suggestion is to tie taking the medicine with a daily ritual, such as brushing your teeth. Certain drugs are best taken at certain times. Diuretics, for example, should be taken in the morning, unless your doctor directs you otherwise.

For drugs prescribed for twice daily, take each dose 12 hours apart. Drugs prescribed for three times daily should be taken every 8 hours, unless otherwise directed. Certain medications should be taken with each meal—ask your doctor about your schedule.

Have your doctor or pharmacist specify a schedule for drugs to be taken four times daily. He may want you to take it four times during

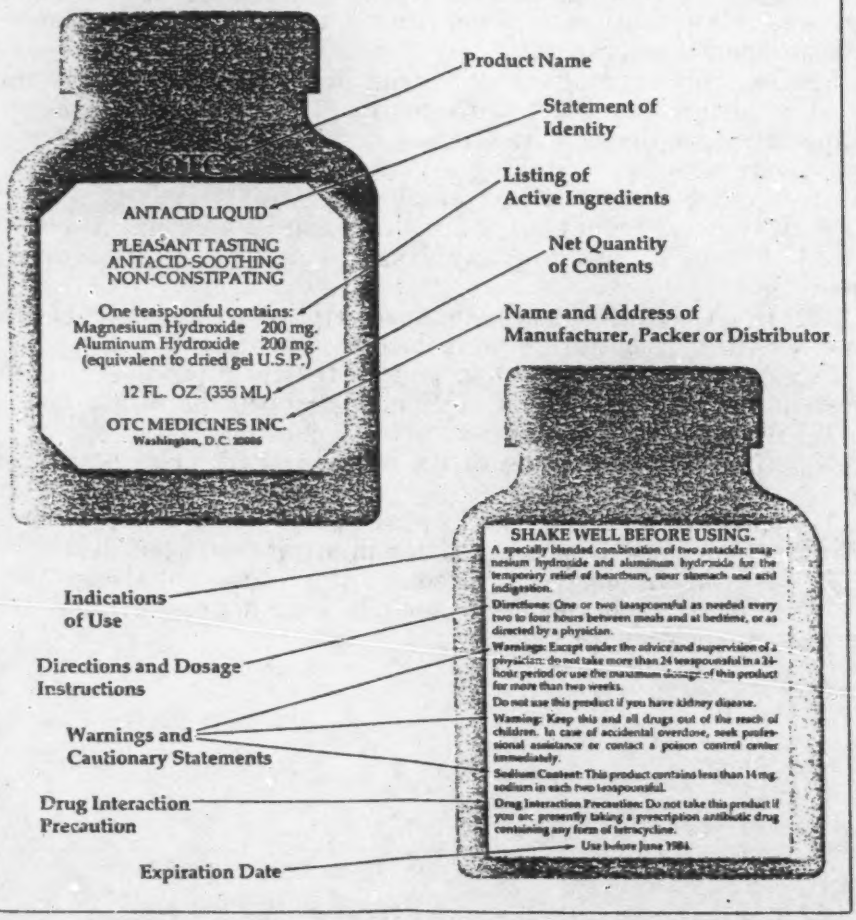
waking hours or around the clock. If the instructions are "as needed," ask your doctor to specify how long you should wait between doses. For drugs prescribed "as directed," insist that your doctor write out on the prescription how you should take the drug.

## NONPRESCRIPTION DRUGS

Nonprescription or over-the-counter (OTC) drugs are available without a doctor's prescription. These drugs can be used safely and without medical supervision by most people as long as label directions are followed.

Label instructions provide very important information to the consumer. They tell how to use the product for best results and how to avoid misusing it. Many labels include warnings which: (1) Suggest limits on the length of use; (2) discuss side effects; and (3) detail conditions which may require a physician's advice before taking the drug. Shown here is a sample OTC drug, with an explanation of the label information.

**WHAT'S ON THE LABEL:** Product information for consumers required or recommended by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and OTC Review Advisory Panels for a typical nonprescription product.


Product Name
Statement of Identity
Listing of Active Ingredients
Net Quantity of Contents
Name and Address of Manufacturer, Packer or Distributor
OTC
ANTACID LIQUID
PLEASANT TASTING
ANTACID-SOOTHING
NON-CONSTIPATING
One teaspoonful contains:
Magnesium Hydroxide 200 mg.
Aluminum Hydroxide 200 mg.
(equivalent to dried gel U.S.P.)
12 FL. OZ. (355 ML)
OTC MEDICINES INC.
Washington, D.C. 20006
SHAKE WELL BEFORE USING.
A specially blended combination of two antacids: magnesium hydroxide and aluminum hydroxide for the temporary relief of heartburn, sour stomach and acid indigestion.
Directions: One or two teaspoonful as needed every two to four hours between meals and at bedtime, or as directed by a physician.
Warnings: Except under the advice and supervision of a physician: do not take more than 24 teaspoonful in a 24-hour period or use the maximum dosage of this product for more than two weeks.
Do not use this product if you have kidney disease.
Warning: Keep this and all drugs out of the reach of children. In case of accidental overdose, seek professional assistance or contact a poison control center immediately.
Sodium Content: This product contains less than 14 mg. sodium in each two teaspoonful.
Drug Interaction Precaution: Do not take this product if you are presently taking a prescription antibiotic drug containing any form of tetracycline.
Use before June 1984.
Indications of Use
Directions and Dosage Instructions
Warnings and Cautionary Statements
Drug Interaction Precaution
Expiration Date

## GUIDELINES FOR PROPER USE OF NONPRESCRIPTION DRUGS

(1) Read the product label thoroughly each time you purchase a nonprescription drug. Even though you have used a product for years, the manufacturer may have changed the formula or revised the directions and warnings. Ask your pharmacist!

(2) Watch for label "flags." They draw your attention to important changes in labeling information.

(3) Become familiar with the ingredients in each product you take. The same ingredients often are used for several purposes. If you take more than one medicine containing the same ingredient, you may be taking an overdose.

(4) Be aware of any nonprescription drugs you should not take. Make a list of those drugs you should avoid.

(5) Follow label directions carefully. Never take a larger dose than directed on the package labeling unless on the recommendation of your doctor or pharmacist.

(6) Observe all warnings carefully. Patients with certain conditions should not take some nonprescription drugs without the advice of their physician or pharmacist. When in doubt, ask.

(7) Observe warnings about side effects, especially drowsiness and dizziness. Many nonprescription drugs can make you too drowsy to drive or operate machinery.

(8) Observe warnings about drug interactions. Many nonprescription drugs can react with prescription medications or other nonprescription drugs with serious and/or dangerous effects. Ask your pharmacist before taking a nonprescription drug. Do tell him about *all* other drugs you are taking.

(9) Buy only amounts of a drug that can be used in a reasonable period of time. Do not keep any drug that has passed its expiration date.

(10) Don't continue using a nonprescription drug for longer than 2 weeks without consulting your doctor or pharmacist.

(11) Ask your pharmacist to remove the child-proof cap on nonprescription packages if you are unable to open the safety cap.

(12) Keep all medication away from children.

(13) Buy nonprescription drugs in sealed, tamper-resistant packages.

(14) Observe if sodium values are given—many drugs contain sodium which must be accounted for in a salt-restricted diet.

(15) Ask about sugar-free products if you are a diabetic.

(16) Ask your pharmacist to include your nonprescription drugs on your medication profile.

## NONPRESCRIPTION DRUG INTERACTIONS TO AVOID

| If you are taking: | Take only with advice: |
|---|---|
| Blood thinners | Aspirin |
| Sugar pills | Aspirin or salicylate containing products |
| Arthritis medicine | |
| Blood thinners | Antacids |
| Certain nerve pills | |
| Certain sleeping pills | |
| Heart pills | |
| Pills for Parkinson's disease | |
| Seizure pills | |
| Certain antibiotics | |
| Blood thinners | Certain laxatives |
| | Alcohol |
| | Vitamin C |
| Nerve pills | Alcohol |
| Sleeping pills | |
| Sugar pills | |
| Pain pills | |

## CONCLUSION

Even proper use of drugs can cause problems, either in the form of an adverse reaction to the drug itself, or an adverse interaction with other medication. Drug misuse can be life-threatening. Problems associated with drug use may be greater for you, as an older person, because of changes in your body's functioning and the fact that you may take a number of prescription and over-the-counter drugs simultaneously.

Consult your doctor or pharmacist if you feel uncomfortable with a drug you are taking, or if you experience any adverse reactions. Don't make decisions on drug use without the advice of these health professionals. Know the names of all medications you take, what they are for, and how you should take them. Don't hesitate to question your doctor or pharmacist about your medications.

The tragedy of drug-induced sickness among America's older population affects us all. Yet it is a tragedy with a remedy. Your efforts as an informed consumer and active member of your health team, when combined with the concern and expertise of your health professionals, can make a big difference. Informed and conscientious use of prescription and nonprescription drugs is your best protection.

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